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# National Parks and Wildlife: Nature conservationists or political puppets?

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I can't help wondering if John Whitehouse believes the propaganda he disseminates or whether he has been entrenched in the heirarchy of the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), dominated by the political influences of the day for so long that he has lost the ability (if he ever had it) to realistically assess the performance of the Service.

I have yet to see any indication that the Service has ever been progressive or proactive in nature conservation. Not even the management of segments of the estate has changed substantially in its history. For example, philanthropic groups of citizens still administer State Recreation Areas. A nucleus of the present band of trustees has been around since the days of Lands Department ownership. Although decreasing in numbers in recent years, they retain a significant and far reaching influence within the Trust system, generally peddling their anti-conservation attitudes.

The "impressive record" in obtaining 4.62% of New South Wales has little to do with the efficiency of the Service. It has largely been a result of outside forces. In this State, the bushwalking fraternity was the first major lobby group and this group formed the nucleus of the early conservation lobby. It is this combined lobby that must bear the responsbility for preservation of a large proportion of the NPWS estate. An indication of their influence can be seen in the large tracts of prime bushwalking habitat in the national parks system, with associated scenic views and mature forests, while biologically productive areas such as estuaries and wetland are conspicious by their absence.

It seems that it is more by accident than by design that reserved areas contain "islands" providing a variety of habitats and consequently significant biodiversity. As Whitehouse points out, the ecosystems acquired which are of world heritage standing was also accidental.

If any one attitude pervades the whole of the system, it is one of "freeze-frame". Emphasis has been placed on acquiring "climax" areas and locking them in time. If one is really interested in nature conservation, areas in a variety of "successional phases" are required, not simply pristine forests that are asthetically pleasing.

Showcases of representative ecosystems with isolated gene pools, identified on the basis of macro-floristic components, will be of little value with the onset of climatic shifts bought about by the greenhouse effect. What is urgently required is a proactive approach to gain corridors and areas large enough to encompass refugia for the maximum numbers of species, incorporating the whole range of wildlife — not just mature trees and furry animals.

Time may have already run out.